

Idaho Roadless Rule Briefing Paper

Project Name: North Fork Ponderosa Pine Restoration

Forest/District: Nez Perce – Clearwater; North Fork District

Date: 11/7/2018

Roadless Area: Pot Mountain and Mallard-Larkins

Management Theme: Pot Mountain - Backcountry Restoration – treatment units.

Pot Mountain - Forest Plan Special Area – within project boundary, but not over-lapping with any treatment units.

Mallard Larkins – Backcountry Restoration – treatment units

Project Status: Small NEPA CE Preparing to Scope

Dates Presented

to Commission: New Project - Not yet presented.

Key Contact: Mike Pruss, Wildlife Program Manager, 208-935-4256

Project Area: Project area is composed of river breaks along the North Fork of the Clearwater River, typically comprised of steep west to south facing slopes. Vegetation is comprised of decadent shrubfields, mixed conifer stringers in Riparian Habitat Conservation Areas and isolated stands of Ponderosa Pine/Western Larch on the driest sites. Project area is approximately 1.5 miles wide by 35 miles long to encompass all of the isolated Ponderosa Pine stands (see Project Map). The project area is bordered by Forest Road 250 on one side for the entire length. The Pot Mountain FSPA is within the project area, but does not overlap with any of the treatment units. The FSPA is in the breaklands of the North Fork, and is similar in description to the project area. Units #1 through #27 are within the Pot Mountain BCR, which ranges from river breaklands through mixed conifer to lodgepole pine and open rocky areas with high mountain lakes, the project area is confined within the breaklands and lower elevation mixed conifer type, and the treatment units are within the breaklands only. Units #29 through #36 are within the Mallard-Larkins BCR, which is similar to the Pot Mountain BCR in bio-physiographic description. The project area overlaps on the Mallard-Larkins BCR within the breaklands to mixed conifer types, but the treatment units are confined to the breaklands. Three treatment units (#28, #37 and #38) are outside of IRA's, and are similar to treatment units within the IRA's.

Purpose and Need: A unique terrestrial wildlife assemblage is dependent upon mature ponderosa pine habitat, including Region 1 Sensitive Species such as Flammulated owls and Pygmy nuthatches. Ponderosa pine stands are uncommon in the upper North Fork drainage. Because the project area is along the North Fork of the Clearwater River, it experiences high summer recreational use, and is therefore susceptible to human-caused wildfires. This project will reduce ladder fuels in ponderosa pine-dominated stands, increasing their resiliency to wildfire, and allowing the stands to be maintained using periodic prescribed fire over the long

term. Maintaining and treating ponderosa pine and larch stands will also maintain and increase the plant diversity in the project area.

This project is within the Lolo Elk Management Zone, an area that historically provided habitat for one of the largest elk herds in North America. Elk habitat and elk populations have declined dramatically in the Lolo Zone in the past decade, partially due to declining habitat quality. Early seral habitats maintained and created by prescribed fire will provide needed wintering areas for elk, moose and deer. Re-setting the growth on the mature brush is needed to provide improved forage quantity and quality for big game, especially in critical winter habitats.

Benefits of this project include but are not limited to: improving sensitive species habitat, improved big game winter range, protecting and promoting long lived fire resistant species such as Ponderosa Pine and Western Larch, diversifying habitat types and vegetation cover, promoting early seral vegetation, and creating a mosaic pattern across the landscape which can reduce the potential for large catastrophic wildfires by limiting their size and severity.

Proposed Action: There are 38 proposed treatment units with 2185 acres of total treatment. Ninety-six (96) acres in parts of 8 units are proposed for non-commercial thinning or slashing, either by contracted labor or by FS staff using chainsaws and other hand tools. No motorized timber equipment will be used for thinning. Piles, composed of thinned and slashed material, may be hand-piled and hand-ignited. Prescribed burning (2185 acres/38 units) will be conducted by FS staff following a prescribed burn plan. Typical ignition techniques include drip torches, fusies, hand-held launchers, and helicopter ignition with spherical dispensers. Units may be re-treated, as necessary, to achieve objectives.

Thirty-two (32) of the treatment units are located in roadless areas and thirty-six (36) of the units are within big game winter range. Regional Forester concurrence, if necessary, for cutting in roadless and any clearances as identified in the burn plan will be procured prior to implementation of those components.

The project boundary includes RHCA's. No cutting or piling and burning will be done in RHCA's. No prescribed fire ignitions will be done in the RHCA's. Prescribed fire will be allowed to back naturally into RHCA's, if they are within a prescribed burn unit. Recent prescribed burns in this area resulted in limited backing into RHCA's, with the fire backing into RHCA's typically going out due to high moisture fuels, high relative humidity, and shaded fuels prior to or shortly after entering RHCA's.

Below is a Table of the proposed treatment units with acres, treatment type, and estimated seasonal timeframe for treatment. Each burn unit will be evaluated by the Burn Boss and the burn implemented during a time when the unit is in prescription and will meet the purpose and need of the project. See maps of the project area and the proposed treatment units along the North Fork of the Clearwater River.

| Unit | Acres | Treatment Type | Estimated Season |
|------|-------|----------------|------------------|
| 1 | 146 | Burn | Spring/fall |
| 2 | 99 | Burn | Spring/fall |
| 3 | 42 | Burn | Spring |
| 4 | 60 | Burn | Spring |
| 5 | 95 | Burn | Spring/fall |

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|----|-----|--|-------------|
| 6 | 108 | Burn | Spring/fall |
| 7 | 84 | Burn | Spring/fall |
| 8 | 23 | Burn | Spring |
| 9 | 58 | Burn | Spring |
| 10 | 34 | Burn | Spring |
| 11 | 87 | Burn | Spring |
| 12 | 74 | Burn/Piles: ~4 acres of piles and possible hand line around outfitter camp | Spring |
| 13 | 58 | Burn | Spring |
| 14 | 65 | Burn | Spring |
| 15 | 162 | Burn | Spring |
| 16 | 147 | Burn | Spring |
| 17 | 48 | Burn | Spring |
| 18 | 96 | Burn | Spring |
| 19 | 55 | Burn | Spring |
| 20 | 42 | Burn/Slash or Piles ~16 acres of piles or possible slashing for Pine/Larch protection | Spring |
| 21 | 89 | Burn | Spring/fall |
| 22 | 94 | Burn/Slash or Piles: ~12 acres of piles or possible slashing for Pine/Larch protection | Spring |
| 23 | 24 | Piles: thin and pile competing conifer around Pine/Larch. Assess need for burn after piles completed | |
| 24 | 15 | Burn | Spring |
| 25 | 70 | Burn | Spring |
| 26 | 77 | Burn/Slash or Piles: ~10 acres of piles or possible slashing for Pine/Larch protection | Spring |
| 27 | 22 | Piles: thin and pile competing conifer around Pine/Larch | |
| 28 | 11 | Burn/Slash or Piles: ~7 acres of piles or slashing for Pine/Larch protection | Spring |
| 29 | 1 | Piles: thin and pile competing conifer around Pine/Larch | |
| 30 | 20 | Burn | Spring |
| 31 | 28 | Burn | Spring |
| 32 | 14 | Burn | Spring |
| 33 | 12 | Burn | Spring |
| 34 | 31 | Burn | Spring |
| 35 | 29 | Burn | Spring |
| 36 | 13 | Burn | Spring |
| 37 | 24 | Burn | Spring |
| 38 | 28 | Burn | Spring |

The project area is accessed from Forest Road 250 from Pierce, Idaho. It can also be accessed from Superior, MT, also on Forest Road 250.

Work could begin as soon as the area is accessible after snow melt and Heritage reviews are done in early summer of 2019, and would continue as weather and resources allow in spring and fall until all units are complete. Burn windows are extremely limited in this area because of weather and other fire activities, so it may take several years to complete all of the burn units.

Post implementation monitoring will be done as identified in the burn plan. Flammulated owl monitoring will be conducted on a 5-year basis to monitor use of the area long-term.

Fuels Treatment Projects and CWPP: The project area falls within the Clearwater County Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) area, and aligns with Goals 2 and 5 of the plan. Goal 2. "Prioritize the protection of people, structures, infrastructure, and **unique ecosystems** that contribute to our way of life and the sustainability of the local and regional economy." Goal 5. "Strategically locate and plan fuel reduction projects." The about ½ of Clearwater County is comprised of USFS lands. There is a large private land/public land interface within the county. The USFS works collaboratively with Idaho Department of Lands, the Clearwater-Potlatch Timber Protective Association (C-PTPA), and local fire departments on fire prevention and public education campaigns within Clearwater County.

Rule References:

The tree cutting activity component of the proposed action falls under the following stipulation:

- Subpart C §294.24(c)(2) Any action authorized pursuant to paragraphs § 294.24(c)(1)(ii) through (v) shall be approved by the Regional Forester and limited to situations that, in the Regional Forester's judgment: (i) Maintains or improves one or more of the roadless characteristics over the long-term; (ii) Maximizes the retention of large trees as appropriate for the forest type to the extent the trees promote fire-resilient stands; and (iii) Is consistent with land management plan components as provided for in § 294.28(d).

Project involves cutting non-commercial trees using slashing/piling/burning treatments to improve habitat for flammulated owls and pygmy nuthatches, both Sensitive Species §294.24(c)(1)(iii) and to maintain and restore the characteristics of ecosystem composition, structure and processes of the Ponderosa Pine stands within the project area §294.24(c)(1)(iv). The treatment will allow for the retention of a diversity of plant and animal communities §294.23(3) and habitat for sensitive species §294.23(4) over the long-term §294.24(c)(2)(i), maximizes the retention of large Ponderosa Pine trees as appropriate for that forest type, promoting fire resilient stands §294.24(c)(2)(ii); and maintains consistency with land management plan components as provided for in §294.28(d).

Scoping comments/objections: Have not scoped yet.

Timeline: Small NEPA scoping will be external by normal distribution methods in either December 2018, or early January 2019. Comment period for external scoping is generally 14 days, depending on Ranger determination (1-30 days). If no issues that would cause there to be a significant effect are identified in comments, the project would move forward. Because of the winter season, a Heritage field visit cannot occur until early next summer. Depending on the Heritage report, it can be complete, or forwarded to the State Historic Preservation Office or review, typically 30 days (2 weeks to 2 months is possible). When this process is complete,

the Ranger could sign the decision, which could range from June to August, 2019, depending on Heritage resource issues.

Summary

- 1. Road Construction/Reconstruction:** No road construction or reconstruction will occur on this project.
- 2. Timber Cutting, Sale, or Removal:** Yes. Up to ninety-six (96) acres of non-commercial cutting of small diameter “ladder” fuels may occur distributed across 349 acres within portions of 8 units. This will not be continuous across the units or landscape, as these fuel loads are discontinuous and spotty. Ladder fuels would be cut and piled for burning on site to reduce the risk of torching mature ponderosa pine and larch during broadcast burning activities.
- 3. Discretionary Minerals:** No minerals will be removed as a component of this project. No active mining claims exist within the project area.
- 4. Modification or Correction:** The activity does not require a modification or correction.

Responsible Official: Andrew Skowlund, North Fork District Ranger, Nez Perce – Clearwater National Forest